



Drinking Gourd

Barbara Hambly

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Benjamin January must uncover a killer to protect a secret . . .

Benjamin January is called up to Vicksburg, deep in cotton-plantation country, to help a wounded “conductor” of the Underground Railroad – the secret network of safe-houses that guide escaping slaves to freedom. When the chief “conductor” of the “station” is found murdered, Jubal Cain – the coordinator of the whole Railroad system in Mississippi – is accused of the crime. Since Cain can’t expose the nature of his involvement in the railroad, January has to step in and find the true killer, before their covers are blown.

As January probes into the murky labyrinth of slaves, slave-holders, the fugitives who follow the “drinking gourd” north to freedom and those who help them on their way, he discovers that there is more to the situation than meets the eye, and that sometimes there are no easy answers.

Drinking Gourd Details

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Author : Barbara Hambly

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From Reader Review Drinking Gourd for online ebook

Denise says

I thoroughly enjoyed this book. This was one of a series of books about a sleuth who solves mysteries. But, what makes this special is that the sleuth is a free man of color living in New Orleans in the 1830's. He's a trained doctor but can't find that type of work so he plays the piano at various balls and parties. Each book in the series explores a different aspect of life in the South during slavery. This one examined the Underground Railroad and the plight of women during this time period. Very interesting story and I learned some things. Read it!

Erin (PT) says

I'm a big fan of Hambly's work, so settling in to one of her novels is always a good time. And, as she generally writes a mystery as the central part of her story, I love trying to pick that mystery apart and figure it out ahead of the reveal. That part was enormous fun, as it always is.

But, further than that, one of the reasons that I've always loved the Benjamin January series is that Hambly is a white woman writing about Blackness and slavery and the friction of race in America with incredible thoughtfulness and perception...and relevancy. Which felt especially in focus, and painful and apt, given what's happening in America right now.

Drinking Gourd sees Ben taken from the relative 'safety' of New Orleans (with plenty of reminders that no place in America is safe, even for the free colored) and inserted into Vicksburg Mississippi, and *far* more dire danger, as part of his work with The Underground Railroad. So I honestly feel like the mystery becomes a secondary consideration in this particular book; Ben's danger, the danger of the particular handful of slaves caught in the middle of all this, the scattershot of other blacks (free and enslaved) and whites tangled in it all, with the threat of violence and death louring over it all...it was a much bigger emotional punch than the intellectual fun of the central murder. At a time when black people are being violently murdered for the most specious of reasons...it hits real hard.

Which, again, is the strength of Hambly's writing, to create something that's both powerfully historical and hurtfully relevant to the modern time. As fiction, it entertains, as something built from history, it hurts. A lot. That's the mirror of history: things have changed but things have not changed.

Jan says

The bank crash of the 1830's has impoverished everyone. Plantation owners are feeling the pinch by not having enough slaves to work their properties. Benjamin and Hannibal have lost many of their entertainment gigs; so few are being held due to the slump. Benjamin and his wife Rose have also lost private students both due to the heat of summer and to cash strapped families.

Consequently, Benjamin and Hannibal have joined a travelling show that will pay them each \$10/week. While performing in Nashville, Ben receives a message that he is needed in Vicksburg at once. The message

is in code from one of his contacts in the Underground Railroad. Ben cannot travel alone outside New Orleans – he could be captured and sold as a slave for a huge price. He and Hannibal make an excuse and leave the show.

One of Ben's colleagues in the Railroad has been shot; another is soon arrested for the murder of a well-hidden member of the antislavery group. A black man cannot question a white or testify in court to what he has discovered. He cannot even travel around the area without his 'master' to protect him.

The Drinking Gourd provides an enhanced view of life in the antebellum South where black men and women are not truly free. This is a good, complex mystery with a detailed view of the times and place. Recommended.

Readalikes:

Colin Whitehead – The Underground Railroad; Eliot Pattison – Bone Rattler and others in the series; David Fulmer's Valentin St. Cyr mysteries; Joan Druett's Wiki Coffin mysteries; Lyndsay Faye – Seven for a Secret; Eleanor Taylor Bland – Fatal Remains; B.B. Oak – Thoreau at Devil's Perch.

Pace: Fast

Characters: Well drawn

Story: Intricately plotted

Writing style: Compelling; richly detailed; descriptive

Tone: Strong sense of time and place; suspenseful

Frame: Vicksburg MS; 1839

Red flags: Evils of slavery

Social issues: Slavery; status of women "same as us, but with better clothes"

Hope says

I love this series. I love Benjamin January. This was a real page turner and a nail biter.

Amy says

This book barely merited 3 stars. It seemed very similar other Benjamin January stories -- Ben gone upriver for some reason with Hannibal, solving a mystery, afraid of being captured and sold as a slave. I had difficulty keeping all the male characters straight, especially at the beginning of the book. I think this series is getting tired.

Redsteve says

Another excellent installment in the series, even though every time I read one of the Benjamin January books I feel like punching a Confederate Statue defender. Drinking Gourd seemed to get off to a slow start but it

really picked up but about halfway through. Probably my favorite historical mystery series.

Shirley Schwartz says

I usually love Benjamin January and the books in this series are usually quite wonderful. There was a long wait for this newest one, and I was excited when I finally got to read it. I had a lot of trouble getting through it. The story is all about the Underground Railroad and the dangers involved with being involved with it, especially down in the deep south. Ben and his friend Hannibal are called down to Vicksburg to help one wounded free coloured conductor of the Underground Railroad. The utmost care must be taken, because no hint of his involvement must get out. So at great risk to themselves, Ben and Hannibal set out, and end up in a hot bed of runaway slaves and the slave catchers who are out to get them at any cost. The drinking gourd of this story is the Big Dipper which leads the runaways north as they try to escape the oppression of slavery in the south. It all sounded like it would be an exciting read, but I found there was a lot of skipping around and such a large cast of characters that it was difficult to keep track of. the plot and how the characters fit into it. I also found the Benjamin January asides which he held in his head as he experienced the oppression first hand, were distracting to the main story. But i couldn't fault Ms. Hambly's descriptions of the dedication of the people who helped to make the Underground Railroad a success during these troubling times. The plot was too disjointed for me to maintain a vested interest in any of the characters, including Benjamin January, who I usually absolutely love. Disappointed, but I will read the next in the series. Hopefully it will be more cohesive than this one was.

robyn says

A real return to form! Despite the fact that it's set entirely outside New Orleans, I didn't miss the usual cast and the familiar streets for a moment. More of the Underground Railroad; more of Ben risking life and limb outside the French City. Hannibal, off the sauce but still trailing Latin tags and threadbare gallantry.

This isn't the sort of book where you can figure out whodunnit; it's not the sort of mystery with clues. Hambly's plots are generally so intricate that sometimes I'm not quite sure how she constructed them even at the end of the story. In this case however, the entire story, with all the consequences of the murder, comes together beautifully. Impossible not to like most of these people, even the rogues.

Hambly's inventiveness when it comes to plot and setting has served this series really well; and while I say I didn't miss New Orleans in this book, I hope we get back there. I'd like to spend some time with Shaw, and Dominique and Olympe and the rest of that familiar circle. I enjoy Ben and I enjoy the stories for themselves, but primarily I enjoy being back there.

Susan Ash hanson says

Excellent, thrilling and fast paced

T. K. Elliott (Tiffany) says

Once again, a one-sitting read from Barbara Hambly.

Ben is called to Vicksburg, where the Underground Railroad is in need of a surgeon. So off Ben goes, accompanied by Hannibal - necessary protection for a black man in that time and place.

Like many of the books in this series, particularly the later ones, the morality/ethics of the situations in which the characters find themselves are almost more important than the murder-mystery. This is one of the reasons why I think the series as a whole is so good.

Hambly does not write characters who are wholly good or wholly bad (except maybe Ben!), but instead shows the more realistic situation - even "good" people do bad things, and "bad" people do good things. That being the case, how many bad things can a "good" person do before he becomes a "bad" person? And what about the people who know what that person is doing, but don't stop him or her? Does standing by make you complicit?

Then, of course, there is today's regrettable tendency to put people in a simple hierarchy, from top to bottom, starting from the most powerful and going down to the least. Hambly demonstrates that power is multifaceted - a person who is in a fortunate, powerful position in some ways, may not be in others. Furthermore, a person's position on the greasy pole may be dictated just as much by who they know - and how much they are valued by those people - as who they are.

Ethics and morality are rather complicated concepts in the real world, where there are no perfect people, or perfect choices. And Ben, too, has to confront the fact that his and Rose's own relatively happy and secure situation in New Orleans means that he often just isn't faced with the difficult choices that others have to make on a daily basis.

Jamie Collins says

In a mystery series where the protagonist is neither a detective nor a cop, and hence has no business solving crimes, it's always funny that they don't seem puzzled to find themselves involved in yet another murder mystery.

This is the 14th such adventure for Benjamin January, physician and musician, who has suffered from every single bit of oppression and angst and horror the author can find to fling at him, and there is quite a lot available to trouble a free man of color living in 1830's New Orleans. This time he's chased and treed (twice) by slave hunters and their dogs; he's nearly kidnapped and sold into slavery; he watches helplessly as an incompetent white doctor bleeds his friend nearly to death; and on top of all that he suffers the indignity of providing music for a minstrel show.

January has gotten involved in the underground railroad, of course, and while touring as a musician with a circus, he receives a summons to help a man who has been injured while helping slaves escape. January travels to Vicksburg, Mississippi with his consumptive white friend Hannibal (who always has a Latin quip on his tongue which Hambly does not translate) tagging along to pose as January's owner. There is murder and a lot of drama, and much grief caused by wicked white men.

Hambly's writing is always really good and I love these characters, but the plot here didn't hold much interest for me. I rather wish this had been about the circus.

Patty says

In the 13th book of the *Benjamin January mysteries*, Benjamin's participation in the Underground Railroad takes a turn for the complicated. The plot starts when Benjamin is summoned to the small town of Vicksburg, Mississippi, where the local Railroad workers need a doctor who knows how to keep secrets. He brings along his friend Hannibal (a white man) for protection, and they soon find that there are many more secrets around than either anticipated.

This is a hard book to talk about without spoilers because of those very secrets. Many characters who seem trustworthy prove not to be, and first appearances count for very little. But without giving away specific plot details, I can say that the book deals with a paradox that's been around since at least Chaucer's *Pardoner's Tale*: "For though myself be a full vicious man / yet I can tell a moral tale". In this case, if the local Underground Railroad absolutely depends on one man, how much harm can that man do before it balances out the lives he's saving? Does it ever? Can good and evil even be balanced on the same scale like that? Benjamin is forced to ask himself how much he can tolerate to keep open this line of the Underground Railroad.

And he's not the only one facing hard decisions. Many people in this book are striving to justify the balance of good and evil in their lives, or just trying to find the easiest path between two terrible fates. It's a book of incredibly complicated choices, and many of the answers the characters give could be betrayals or salvations; it all depends on your perspective.

Another theme is the position of women (and I kind of mourn the absence of Rose in this book, because I'd love to see her comments on it all. Though I suppose it's easy to guess what she would say). Black and white, free or slave, married or single, upper class or prostitute, they're all trapped by the patriarchy and left with few options. Whether they sacrifice themselves or those with yet less power, there's no way to break those chains without someone suffering for it. Also – I can't think of a way to bring this up subtly – there is a lot of rape in this book (though none of it "on screen"), so if that's something you're sensitive to, be aware.

If there's anything I would critique, it's that *Drinking Gourd* is a little too busy, especially at the beginning, although it's hard to fault the book for that because there's an enormous cast to be introduced, complete with all of their relationships and rivalries, not to mention a new setting to describe. The mystery hangs on a complicated tangle of 'who knew what when and where were they?', which necessitates the telling of yet more detailed information. Personally, I missed seeing the characters get a chance to simply breathe and spend time together, and I would have liked more space for their emotional reactions after some of the dramatic moments. But that lack (if it even is one; I'm sure some readers are bored with those sort of characterization details and prefer the action) makes room for a book that is one of the grandest in the series, and which grapples with questions of a deeper and darker nature.

You could easily read this book without knowing anything about the rest of the series. It's a book that takes seriously the problems of ethical action in a flawed world, of the impossibility of escaping from any awful situation without causing damage, and it gives a picture of American history which is complicated and layered and hugely engrossing. As dark as this book is, it was hard to stop reading. Highly recommended.

I read this as an ARC via NetGalley.

dianne says

I LOVE Benjamin January. My first book in this series was Wet Graves which brought to life a chapter in US history i knew (know) too little about; early 19th century New Orleans, when it was still French. It is such an engaging book it lead me into a prolonged exploration of New Orleans history, especially before it was part of the USA (and taken over by Kaintucks), voodoo, and graveyards (St Louis #1 being one of the “must see” cemeteries among us cemetery affectionados). And several trips. And, of course, every other Benjamin January book i could get my mitts on.

The majority of the books in this series take place in the south, but a couple recent stories were placed elsewhere (wild wild West, Mexico) and they just didn't work for me. Something about being a free Black during the slave years lends a precariousness to life that makes the creativity and intelligence needed to survive among the greedy, inhumane and stupid, all the more amazing and, when successful, satisfying.

This book - a fantastic, intricate, unexpected plot - takes place entirely in the South, primarily Mississippi, where - even with papers proving freedom - a Black person is constantly at risk. Papers can be torn up and you might find yourself sold to do backbreaking work ‘til you die. The average survival of a man slave on a cotton plantation was 7 years. Seven years. Creepy, horrible US history

Benjamin, a large, dark Black man who, through the weirdness of the demimonde, was taken from a slave plantation as a child, to be educated and protected by his mother's white, French, lover, via the *Plaçage* system. He trained in Paris as a surgeon, speaks many languages, teaches piano (Black doctors, either in France or New Orleans had too few patients to make a living) and is a master detective. Survival means being able (and willing) to play the uneducated slave when necessary, and our hero can slip in and out of character with finesse.

This story involves (as the title predicts) the Underground Railroad and the people - black and white - who made it run. Every stop, every exchange, every moment on this pathway is life threatening, yet hundreds if not thousands of people put their lives at risk in an attempt to bring strangers to freedom. What if their motives, their actions aren't completely altruistic? Can someone be sort of good and partially horrible?

Benjamin plays slave to his friend Hannibal - a white older man, also well educated, who is slowly dying from consumption. Vignettes wherein Benjamin is speaking as an uneducated slave (“Yessuh”) then leaning over, or in a whisper, communicating with Hannibal in Latin, (“*Odi profanum vulgas et arceo*”) are a delight.

Highly recommended.

Susan says

Benjamin is on the road - or rather the river - in the house band of a travelling circus. Outside of New Orleans things are very different for a black man who can't go anywhere unaccompanied by a white person for fear of being kidnapped and sold. The mystery is secondary to the really interesting and suspenseful Underground Railway plot. Nobody is quite what he or she seems.

Christine says

Where did my review get to?? I posted it months ago...?
